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The International Review of Ancient Art & Archaeology

MINERVA

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2006 PUBLISHED IN GREAT BRITAIN £4.00/$7.99 USA VOLUME 17 NUMBER 6

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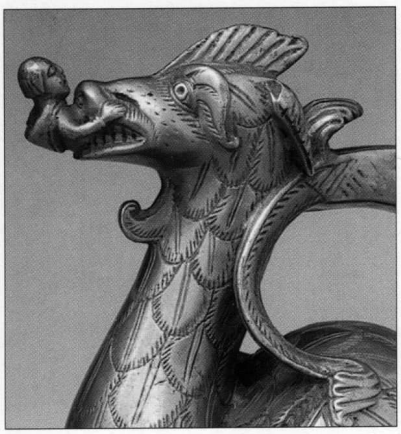

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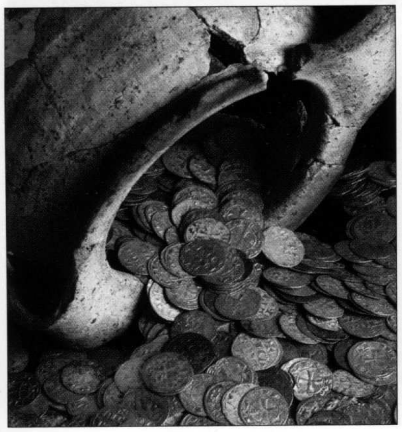

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Published in England by the proprietor, Aurora Publications Ltd., 14 Old Bond St, London, W1S 4PP. Tel: (020) 7495 2590; Fax: (020) 7491 1595; E-mail: minerva@minervamagazine.com.

ROMAN AMHEIDA: EXCAVATING A TOWN IN EGYPT'S DAKHLEH OASIS

Roger S. Bagnall, Paola Davoli, Olaf E. Kaper, and Helen Whitehouse

Far from the Nile valley - about 300km from Luxor - and deep in the western desert lies the Dakhleh Oasis (Figs 1, 3). This oasis has been the subject of a regional survey for the last 28 years by the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP), directed by Professor Anthony Mills. The dominant town of the north-western part of the oasis and its largest surviving ancient site is Amheida, where a team sponsored by Columbia University as part of the DOP has been excavating since 2004. Amheida has many similarities with Ismant el-Kharab, ancient *Kellis*, excavated since 1986 by Colin Hope of Monash University, Australia, who has found many papyri, ostraca, wooden tablets, and perhaps most famously its trove of Manichaean literary texts and family letters, as well as important early Roman wall paintings.

The Great Oasis is the product of underground fossil water brought to the surface in prehistoric times by artesian springs and in historic times by wells. Its great distance from the Nile valley posed unusual challenges for transportation. It was explored and then occupied by the Old Kingdom pharaohs (2686-2181 BC), but it was probably the Saite pharaohs (664-525 BC) and the Persian kings (525-359 BC) who began serious develop- ment. This increased considerably under the Romans. Late Antiquity saw a moderate decline, followed by a dramatic fall-off in settlement for several centuries, although never abandonment.

Amheida is key to understanding this history, because surface survey shows pottery of all periods from the Old Kingdom to Late Roman times, when it was called *Trimithis* and transformed from a village into a city. *Trimithis* became the principal centre of the western part of the oasis, surrounded by smaller settlements producing olive oil, wine, dates, and figs. Including its cemeteries, the site today is about 2km

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Fig 1. An enhanced satellite image of Amheida, Roman Trimithis, in the Dakhleh Oasis, revealing the distinct outlines of Roman and Early Byzantine settlement. Green triangles: surface finds; red triangles: structural remains.

Fig 2. The 4th-century AD house at Amheida under excavation.

Fig 3 (below). General view of Amheida against the background of the scarp bounding the Dakhleh Oasis.

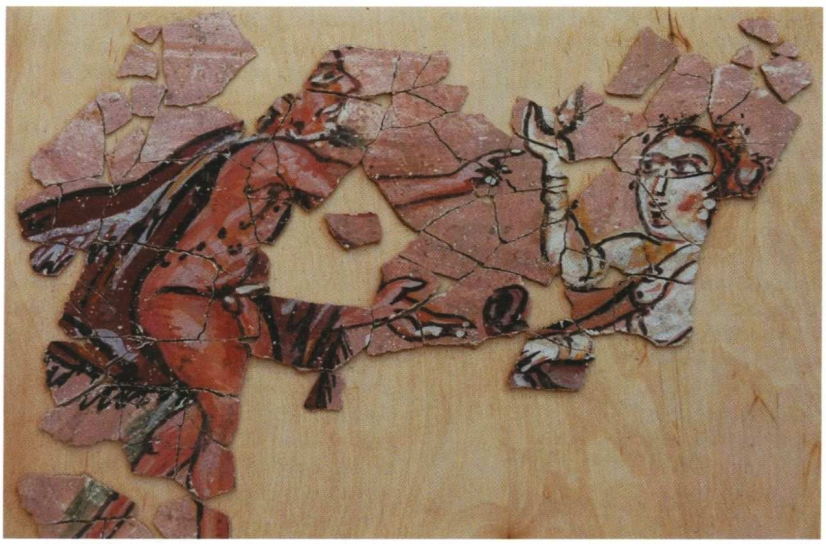


Fig 4. A satyr and nymph wall painting scene reconstructed from fragments excavated in the reception room of a Late Roman house at Amheida abandoned in the 360s AD.

Fig 5. The scene of the Olympian gods on the east wall of the 4th century AD house opens with the unrelated figure of Polis, 'City' (left), a favourite personification in Late Roman art, but here perhaps alluding to local interest in the enhanced status of Amheida.

Fig 6. The west wall of the Late Roman house depicts banqueters reclining on a draped couch, beakers in hand. While this may belong to the mythical sphere, the characterisation of the group - a couple with two younger men - has a family aspect to it. The milieu recalls similar scenes of feasting or picnics on silverware and mosaics: the good life of the prosperous in the Roman provinces.

long and 1km wide, although the entire site was probably not all inhabited in any one period. In Late Antiquity it was perhaps home to 5000 to 10,000 people. The site has never been reoccupied, and only in a few spots has treasure-hunting or stone-robbing done any significant damage to the site (one of these, alas, its principal temple). We have therefore the rare possibility of studying a Graeco-Roman town site at its full extent.

We began our excavations with the 4th-century Roman house in the centre of the site (Fig 2), where paintings had been discovered during the first survey 25 years earlier. This house, probably abandoned in or shortly after the 360s, had a 15m-square residential core, plus a large work area on the north side. A courtyard flanked by a kitchen and stairs to the roof was its central hub. From this one entered a large domed reception room decorated with mythological paintings (Figs 4-6). On the west was a series of four rooms, yet to be excavated, three of them with wall paintings.

This substantial house has so far yielded more than 200 *ostraca*, which show that the owners were rich owners of land with a portfolio of wells, and that the last patron was probably a city councillor named Serenos. Their culture was Greek, and they have left us both art and writing to tell us about it.

The central painted room, measuring 5.3 x 4.7m, had been known since 1979 to contain lively figurative scenes from classical mythology, the characters in part identified by Greek inscriptions: Perseus rescuing Andromeda; the homecoming of Odysseus; and the merriment of the Olympian gods bidden by Hephaistos to see how he has trapped the adulterous Ares and Aphrodite (also a tale from Homer's *Odyssey*). This 'labelled literature' genre was already known from funerary paintings in the cemetery at Tuna el-Gebel but had not previously been found in a domestic context in Egypt. Complete clearance of the room has now revealed the décor in its full glory, from the lower zone of the walls, painted with panels of colourful geometric decoration, to the fragments of the collapsed domed ceiling, which once carried a variety of patterns probably evoking coffering and was supported by smiling winged female figures holding garlands.

The figurative scenes were placed between these two zones in at least two registers with compartments formed by black frames on which the Greek captions were written in white. Other subjects have now been added to those revealed in 1979: Orpheus playing his lyre to the animals; a banqueting group enjoying the music of a flautist, while a servant ladles out wine (Fig 6); a chariot

scene; and perhaps also a murder; the presence of Harpocrates in the guise of the infant Herakles; and perhaps Isis, too, offers a hint that the subjects extended beyond Greek literature into popular religion. Their full range, however, may never be known: none of the mud-brick walls has survived intact to their full height. The paint was applied on a very thin layer of white plaster, and the pieces of decorated wall which fell with the ceiling on to the fill covering the floor of the room have suffered greatly.

Despite conservation problems, what is clear is that the owner of the house aspired to give visitors an impression of wealth and culture - an aim shared by the occupants of the grand houses of Rome at this period, where reception or dining rooms were decorated with costly coloured marble revetments, paintings, stucco work, and lavish coffered ceilings. In its general layout the Amheida room reflects this kind of programme; the influence of *opus sectile* stonework and mosaics can be seen especially in the patterned panels of the lower zone.

Mythological subjects such as Orpheus are familiar in the repertoire of Late Roman mosaics, but the wide and heterogeneous selection of scenes here seems particular to the place; and what these provincial paintings lack in finesse of style and execution is made up for by the vivid figures they portray, their emphatic gestures and facial expressions signalling their stories to the viewer.

The house's cultural scene was not only visual. In the 2006 season we excavated a rectangular room (6.8 x 2.7m) in the north-west corner that before excavation looked to be without significant features. When partly cleared of its sand, however, it turned out to have inscriptions on one wall, with some faint traces on the facing wall, along which ran a bench (Fig 7).

In modern terms the wall was a teacher's whiteboard (Fig 8). Some parts of the inscription, indeed, were deliberately erased in antiquity. What was written on it in red paint is unmistakably a teacher's model for students, Greek elegiac couplets of poetry written in a careful hand and equipped with accents, breathings, macrons, marginal symbols, and high dots for *caesura* pauses. The poems are all addressed by the teacher to his students, sometimes with explicit headings, using terms like *paides* and *scholastikoi* to refer to them. They are urged to drink deep from the fountain of the muses, to emulate Herakles in their labours, and to follow Hermes, the god of rhetoric, who as Thoth was also the patron divinity of *Trimithis*. The discovery that versified rhetorical composition was being taught in this remote town in the 4th century is of enormous importance for the history of ancient education. This is not the only poetry in Dakhleh, however. Apparently original verses were also found on a fragment from another house at Amheida, and the excavations at Kellis found a Homeric parody on wooden tablets, while the gateway to the temple at Ain Birbiyeh yielded a verse inscription.

Even though the temple of Amheida was destroyed a long time ago, and wind erosion has wreaked havoc on the site's surface, several hundred sandstone blocks and fragments have been recovered from its debris (Figs 9-10). The temple had been dedicated to Thoth, the god of writing and of the moon, who was represented as a baboon or an ibis. The ongoing excavations are yielding temple reliefs from the Roman period, mainly from the reigns of Titus (AD 79-81) and Domitian (AD 81-96), but also from the pharaonic period. Many earlier relief fragments, reused in the masonry of the Roman period, date back to the Libyan period (23rd Dynasty, c. 830-715 BC) and Late Period (26th and possibly 27th Dynasties, 664-359 BC). A single block preserves the name of king Pedubast, a ruler who reigned over the south of Egypt around 818-793 BC. Until now it had not been known that the kings of the 23rd Dynasty controlled the oases of the Western Desert. Another find was a hieratic stela, which must have been set up in the temple of Pedubast, as it is dated to the reign of Takeloth III (c. 764-751 BC), another Libyan ruler of the 23rd Dynasty. This proves beyond doubt that the temple was already dedicated to the god Thoth at this time.

There is much more information available on a later phase of the temple from the 26th dynasty (664-525 BC). No less than three kings of that dynasty are named on the blocks, namely Necho II, Psamtek II, and especially Amasis (Fig 9), who ordered a substantial new sanctuary to be built. A reconstruction of its decoration shows long rows of deities on the walls of a large vaulted room. During the Persian domination, the temple may have been extended further. It was replaced by an entirely new building in the Roman period.

Amheida is surrounded on its southern and eastern sides by sprawling cemeteries (Fig 11), which include numerous well preserved mud-brick chapels of the Roman period. Some of these have wide barrel-vaulted rooms, plastered and decorated with bright colours. But the most impressive buildings in the cemeteries are two mud-brick 'pyramids' dominating the landscape. One of these, the east pyramid, is Amheida's signature monument (Figs 12-13). This massive building (6.4 x 6.4m and about 6m high) is readily visible from the road which passes the site, being built on the highest hillock of the cemetery. The monument is a truncated pyramid on a rectangular podium surrounded by numerous

Fig 7 (below left). General view of the 'schoolroom' in the Late Roman house.

Fig 8 (below right). Detail of the 'schoolroom' wall with Greek elegiac couplets exhorting students to learn rhetoric (at left).

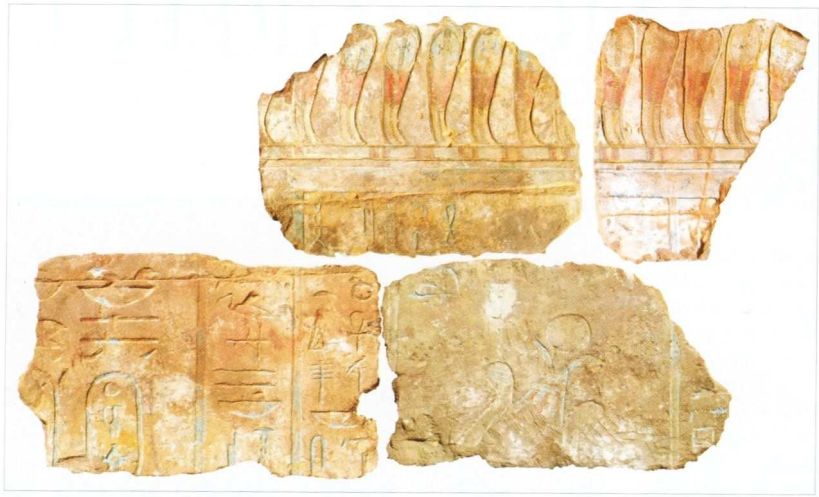


Fig 9 (above). A reassembly of blocks from the Temple of Thoth built by Amasis (r. 569-526 BC), with his cartouche and a row of sacred cobras.

Fig 10 (above right). The god Thoth depicted as a baboon on a block from the 1st-century AD Roman temple.

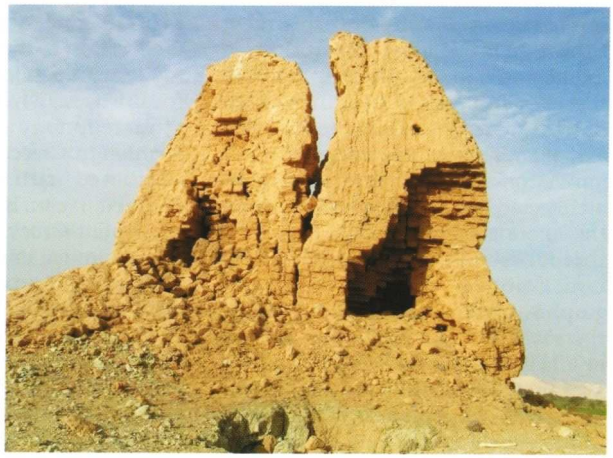
Fig 11 (below left). View of the cemetery area to the south of Amheida.

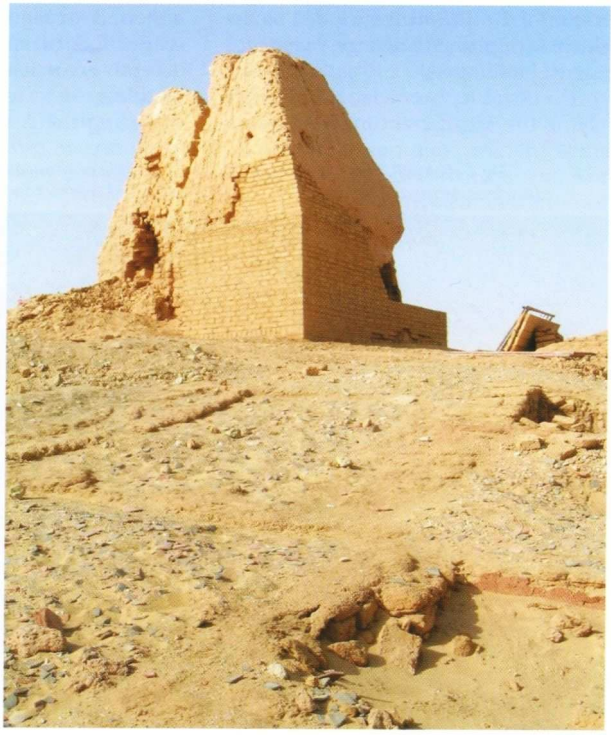
Figs 12-13 (middle and bottom right). The 6m-high mud-brick pyramid mortuary monument at Amheida before and after restoration.

plundered burials and chapels, one of which may have been connected with the pyramid. Although the pyramids are the symbol of ancient Egypt, such monuments are extremely unusual in the Roman period. A few similar structures, also Roman, have been discovered by Egyptian archaeologists in one of the cemeteries of Mut, called Bir esh-Shagala, with a pyramidal superstructure and one or two vaulted chambers for burials beneath.

The Amheida pyramid has been seriously damaged by robbers' holes that caused the collapse of parts of the corners, creating a situation dangerous both for the conservation of the monument and for its possible excavation. In February 2006 consolidation and rebuilding of the north-east and south-east corners took place under the supervision of Nicholas Warner. Five thousand new bricks, locally made of mud without straw to avoid insect infestation, matching the ancient brick size and following the English bond, were used (Fig 13). During the 2007 season the consolidation will be extended to the western side of the pyramid, where part of the base will be reconstructed to sustain the original masonry still in place.

Apart from completing the consolidation of the pyramid and the excavation of the Late Roman house, in 2007 we hope to continue surveying the extensive visible remains of the Roman town. Beyond that lies a continuing effort both to enlarge the excavated area at the heart of the Late Roman town and to identify remains of earlier periods that can give a fuller sense of the long history of the 'back of the oasis'.





For further details on the excavations at Amheida, see: www.mcah.columbia.edu/amheida.